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Grad students worked for CIA unwittingly in research project

By JIM SCHACHTER

"That was the '50s. It was before Vietnam. It was a different ballgame then completely," Esther Sparberg, professor of chemistry at a New York college, said by phone recently.

She was trying to explain why a few days after learning that her 1957-58 doctoral fellowship at Teachers College (TC) was funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, she had quickly lost her anger over a revelation that had "absolutely floored" her at first.

Sparberg and four other TC doctoral students were given one-year, \$4,000 grants to produce a "Study of Patterns Which Have Characterized Major Scientific Breakthroughs of the Twentieth Century." The sixth student in the group, Robert Scidmore, is identified in CIA documents obtained by Spectator as an employee of the Agency's Office of Scientific Intelligence (OSI).

"I suppose if someone had talked to me in those days about joining the CIA, I would have been honored," said Herbert Stewart, another of the doctoral fellows who now teaches science education at Florida Atlantic University.

"Subsequent to that time," he noted in a phone interview, "I would have been horrified."

The Breakthrough study, which hardly merits a footnote in the annals of CIA covert activities, nevertheless is a colorful illustration of the Agency's penetration of and acceptance into the academic world of the 1950s and '60s.

The project was initiated by the CIA. In July 1956, the Agency invited proposals for a study of scientific breakthroughs as part of its investigation of Soviet scientific capabilities. One OSI document notes that a year before, the CIA had called its ability to predict foreign scientific advances second in defense value only to America's "capability for direct attack."

Frederick Fitzpatrick, chairman of the TC science department, proposed in late July that the project be undertaken at TC. Negotiations ensued, with the knowledge of TC Dean Stephen Corey and Controller Thad Hungate. A contract, with an estimated final cost of \$24,380 for the five fellowships and administrative expenses, was signed by TC and CIA representatives in January 1957.

While CIA sponsorship of the study was classified "confidential" the final report and all preliminary work was unclassified.

"Qualified doctoral candidates will work for and be paid by the university without knowledge of CIA interest through a system of fellowship grants," an OSI memo explained.

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TC students would do studies of past breakthroughs in Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Medicine, and of "present potential breakthroughs."

Fitzpatrick (who died in 1976) had agreed that an agency employee should complete a chapter of the study analyzing the other students' findings. The CIA would also retain the power to veto Fitzpatrick's selections of researchers. He would visit Washington occasionally to report on the study's progress, and meanwhile work with a CIA employee on "detail planning throughout" the project's existence.

Fitzpatrick, Corey, Hungate and Ralph Fields, a professor of education who served on the dissertation oversight committee, were given security clearance relative to the project up to the classification "secret," the CIA's intermediate secrecy category.

According to interviews with four of the five doctoral candidates, Fitzpatrick used no unusual criteria in selecting his researchers.

Sparberg was one of Fitzpatrick's doctoral advisees. Eugene Petrick, now president of Bellarmine College in Louisville, heard of the project from another faculty member and asked Fitzpatrick for a fellowship. Stewart, who was having trouble financing his PhD in Botany, applied to study science education at TC and was invited by Fitzpatrick to join the

study.

"Everybody in the project was selected either because they had completed all their doctoral courses or were pretty close," recalled John Rosengren, now a professor of Biology at William Patterson College in New Jersey.

(Father Laurence Grassman, the fifth student, is a semi-invalid. He chose not to discuss his participation in the study with Spectator.)

From February 1957 to February 1958, the students conducted their research, usually meeting weekly to discuss their project. Several times during the year, Robert Scidmore, a non-resident student who commuted from Washington, attended the meetings.

"He did not work with us as closely as the other members," Petrick recalled. "Much of it was done long distance and by mail."

The group, Sparberg remembered, was unsure how Scidmore became involved in the study. "We talked about it once in awhile and wondered what he was doing in Washington," she said.

"Everybody was rather piqued that he seemed to be doing less than anybody else," said Rosengren. None of the students knew that Scidmore would later prepare an internal analysis of their work for OSI.

Neither did the students question the source of their funding. Some believed the money came from the Office of Naval Research, accepting the story because of Fitzpatrick's widely known role as a Naval Reserve commander. All perceived the study as part of TC's Science Manpower Project, a Cold War effort, headed by Fitzpatrick, to improve science education in U.S. secondary schools.

(One OSI memo notes, "The Breakthrough study is operated by Teachers College as a supplement to the Manpower Study for the purpose of cover.")

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Fitzpatrick, relished his part in the covertly financed study. While his supervision of the students' work was "loose," according to Sparberg, his attention to the CIA's needs was unsparing.

A March 1, 1957, OSI memo describes Fitzpatrick's meeting with Agency representatives the previous day. During the "all-day conference," Fitzpatrick not only advised the CIA of the status of the Breakthrough study, but offered advice and comments on a half-dozen unrelated subjects.

The professor agreed to develop a proposal for a similar study, aimed at "evaluating the quality of Soviet science." He was asked to recommend a possible consultant for the Agency's "Special Projects Branch," which handled "across-the-board" projects in scientific intelligence.

During the latter discussion Fitzpatrick indicated he knew a scientist named Furnas, recently resigned as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Development. (The reference was to Clifford Furnas, later chancellor of the University of Buffalo.) That statement, the following excerpt indicates, moved his Agency debriefers to raise another issue:

One of the sub-projects of the Breakthrough Project is to determine what fields of basic scientific research the Department of Defense is interested in, particularly those fields which, by reason of extensive Defense support, may be approaching a major advance. It was thought that Dr. Fitzpatrick, through his close personal friendship with Dr. Furnas, might be able to assist in obtaining this information.

Action

Dr. Fitzpatrick will obtain the information.

Fitzpatrick, the Naval Reserve commander, agreed, in effect, to spy on the U.S. Defense Department as part of a CIA intelligence effort directed at the Defense Department. None of the documents obtained by Spectator state the outcome of Fitzpatrick's investigation.

While the documents tell of no further association between Fitzpatrick and the CIA after the Breakthrough study ended in 1958, one of the five student researchers was approached by the Agency a few months later.

They brought me to Washington and came close to offering me a job" in "winter '58 or early spring '59," recalled Eugene Petrik, the college president, who wrote a chapter in the study on imminent breakthroughs.

An unidentified caller, who Petrik believed was Robert Scidmore, made an initial inquiry. After a personal meeting with a second man who also failed to identify himself as a CIA representative, Petrik was invited to the CIA offices, then in Washington.

"They really didn't make me an offer," he said. "They were just kind of exploring whether I might be interested." Petrik went on to teach at colleges in New York, New Jersey and California before becoming president of Bellarmine in 1969.

Neither Petrik nor the other students said they could understand why CIA sponsorship of their unclassified, uncontroversial study was kept secret.

"It just may have been part of the ethos of the CIA at the time," Petrik speculated. Sparberg agreed, pointing to the "CIA's mentality for keeping everything secret."

Midway through the project's work, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first manmade satellite and a symbol to Americans that the U.S. was falling behind in the Cold War competition for scientific preeminence.

"I remember very clearly being in Fred Fitzpatrick's office the day that Sputnik went up," said Herbert Stewart. "I remember saying something to him about Sputnik and I remember him not wanting to talk about it."

Perhaps the former naval commander saw his cooperation with the CIA as a form of Cold War patriotism. Perhaps, too, he enjoyed the trappings of the intelligence community—the secret meetings, the post office box number to which he addressed correspondence on the project.

Consider Fitzpatrick's last act as director of TC's Breakthrough project.

An OSI memo dated December 1, 1958, describes an Agency representative's November 20 meeting with Fitzpatrick at TC. They discussed the final disposition of the project's financial records.

"As stated by Professor Fitzpatrick no formal accounting was maintained except by him" the CIA representative's memo reads, "and he requested that he be authorized to destroy the rough account records as they no longer served any purpose. The destruction was accomplished in the presence of the undersigned."